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# "The Best Bad Things": An Analytical History of the Madams of Gold Rush San Francisco

Sophie Breider

*Claremont McKenna College*

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**Claremont McKenna College**

**“The Best Bad Things”: An Analytical History of the Madams  
of Gold Rush San Francisco**

**Submitted to  
Professor Tamara Venit-Shelton**

**by  
Sophie Breider**

**for  
Senior Thesis  
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## Introduction

Leaving San Francisco in 1849, Hinton Rowan Helper wrote in his travel journal *Land of Gold* “It is my unbiased opinion that California can and does furnish the best bad things that are obtainable in America.” One of those “bad things” was prostitution, and San Francisco was home to some of the most famous brothels, prostitutes and madams of the West. James W. Marshall discovered gold in the American River at Sutter’s Mill just a year before Helper’s California visit, and the glittering discovery both inflamed the American imagination and sparked a previously unprecedented explosion of migration West that made San Francisco a Western metropolis and the epicenter of American Western prostitution.<sup>1</sup>

The California Gold Rush intensified American migration to the far West and San Francisco became the city that fulfilled the doctrine of Manifest Destiny in nineteenth century American imagination. It is not surprising that San Francisco helped permeate the larger mythos of the American West. Gold mining upheld was the promise of a self-made fortune and a self-staked claim to land. It conjured then, and still does now, a new world imagined and advertised as the ultimate open space in which any man could achieve the self-reliance that, in the image of Jeffersonian Republicanism, is so inherently American. Gold Rush San Francisco satisfied American’s self-prophesized destiny — a nation conquering a whole continent — from sea to shining sea.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cronon, William. 1991. *Nature's Metropolis : Chicago and the Great West*. New York: W.W. Norton.

<sup>2</sup> Kathy Lee Bates, *America the Beautiful*

The popular, romanticized idea of the motivations of the California Gold Rush and the Doctrine of Manifest Destiny has little bearing on reality with one major exception: the prevalence of prostitution and the power of the madam. The “bad things” to which Helper refers, vice of all sorts, were ubiquitous in the American West.

The study of prostitution, both as it occurred in the American West and as it has been remembered, is of particular significance to understanding the history of gender and race in the 19th-century West. Americans have fixated on the brothels, parlour houses, prostitutes, and madams of the Wild West for almost a century.<sup>3</sup> Modern American media continues to be replete with fictional representations of Western prostitution - simultaneously celebrating, romanticizing, and misrepresenting the women themselves. Because of prostitution's great popularity in history but common misconceptions, greater study and a more accurate remembrance of the prostitution, and the men and women involved, are necessary to understand its significance to American history and the formation of national identity.

The Gold Rush era in San Francisco, roughly the years of between 1848 and 1856, permitted some of the most famous and most socially acceptable opportunities for vice in American history. Helper's approval of the “bad things” in California, and San Francisco specifically, was emblematic of the generation's attitudes. Vice was, and still is, determined and considered on a largely subjective scale: the Oxford English Dictionary defines “vice” as “immoral or wicked behaviour But the most prominently

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<sup>3</sup> *Westworld*. Directed by Jonathan Nolan. Written by Halley Wegren Gross and Lisa Joy. HBO Network. 2016.

agreed upon “vices” that Gold Rush San Francisco offered were liquor, narcotics, gambling, violence and prostitution. By considering how this vice existed, flourished, then became criminalized, a true understanding of the American West is born. To do this, one must consider San Francisco as both a space and a process, as Patricia Limerick urges in *The Legacy of Conquest*. To consider Gold Rush San Francisco as a space: the discovery of gold in California and subsequent immense diversity of immigration to both the state and San Francisco itself created a very different looking, speaking, and classed, city than what Americans had been used to in the east. Following Limerick’s logic, the Gold Rush city was more than just a space, it was a process: one that housed a huge number of players and institutions that came to constitute the American Western image. Therefore the separate and careful analysis of both the space and process of the city are essential to understanding the city - especially considering how extremely dynamic and novel the geographic, cultural and social atmosphere of the city was in that American era.

To debunk the long held frontier and Manifest Destiny theses, a modern American historian, with the benefit of hindsight, views the formation of the West as a conquest aided by the emergence of and reliance on a strong American federal government.<sup>4</sup> Gold Rush San Francisco, along with other Western cities town, and camps, lacked the social and political institutions of power that Americans were accustomed to and relied upon to maintain, exercise and justify an essentially white patriarchal social order. By tracing the San Francisco history from early intensive settlement with the initial Gold Rush to Gold Bust, one is essentially tracing the process

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<sup>4</sup> Limerick, Patricia. *The Legacy of Conquest*.

of “how San Francisco became American”<sup>5</sup>. In doing so, the process of *becoming* American as one of conquest and extreme reliance on racial and gendered hierarchy reveals itself.<sup>6</sup>

The madam, specifically the madams of San Francisco, became iconic women of power, means and even more, an embodiment of the city’s proclivity for vice. The American imagination has created an image of a madam, and fictional representations of them do not stray far from this image — beautiful, young, white, witty and the perfect combination of bawdy and charming. In 1848, when gold drove men West, most women stayed behind and San Francisco was home to only 200 women<sup>7</sup>; the city’s dramatically unequal sex ratio made sex work not only a viable, but oft profitable and acceptable as an occupation for women. As gold brought hundreds of thousands to California, it also expanded the market for prostitution. In just two years, more than 2,000 women arrived in San Francisco, and their arrival was welcomed by the male population.<sup>8</sup>

Two women, Belle Cora and Ah Toy, were the most prominent, popular, and earliest of the San Francisco Gold Rush madams. As sex traffickers, they were also largely responsible for the influx of women and prostitutes to the city. Both women inspired many characteristics of the myth of the American madam, and by comparing their similar and disparate qualities, the foundational misconceptions in the myth of the

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<sup>5</sup> Berglund, Barbara. *Making San Francisco American: Cultural Frontiers in the Urban West, 1846-1906*. Lawrence: U of Kansas, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Limerick, Patricia. *The Legacy of Conquest*.

<sup>7</sup> Asbury, Herbert. *The Barbary Coast: An Informal History of the San Francisco Underworld*. Garden City Publishing, Inc. 1933. p 33

<sup>8</sup> *Alta California*, May 7, 1850

madam can be exposed and a better understanding of Western women will be developed.



## Historiography

The Gold Rush of the mid 19th century led to unprecedented and massive expansion into the westernmost American state, which became home to a heterogeneous group of people and lacked any institutionalized social power. In this novel climate, white patriarchy failed to exert natural influence as it did in the American east and therefore people of color and women were afforded opportunities that were not available to them elsewhere. During the California Gold Rush, women and people of color were gaining power and achieving social status that was entirely denied them in the rest of America. This power and visibility, however, was quickly and systematically removed with the end of the Rush and the closure of the Frontier, which follows the example of American implementation of power that Kathleen M. Brown discusses in *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches and Anxious Patriarchs*. While her text focuses on hierarchical formations in the American colonies, her model is just as effective when applied to the city of Gold Rush San Francisco.

Specifically American Western scholarship exists that acknowledges the unique social and economic opportunity for madams and the sex workers during the California Gold Rush, such as Curt Gentry's *The Madams of San Francisco*. By examining other texts discussing the social and economic structure of San Francisco during the Gold Rush, the power of these madams can be better situated and understood as unique and defiant to the white American patriarchy that, while long strong in the US, failed to exert natural power in the novel society that was Gold Rush San Francisco. Social analysis of

Gold Rush San Francisco, such as *The Theater of the Gold Rush Decade in San Francisco* and *Making San Francisco American* both provide significant information about madams and prostitutes that solidify their power as social and economic actors in the city during this era. By combining existing knowledge scholarship that specifically examines these madams with more general Gold Rush San Francisco scholarship, a better understanding can be made of these women's incredible prominence in society during the Rush and quick and systemically and patriarchally implemented downfall during the California Gold Bust.

While women empowered themselves during the California Gold Rush through prostitution, they were as quickly stripped of this status with the arrival of American institutions of power to California that naturalized and reaffirmed the ruling power of the white patriarchy. A diverse array of scholarship exists that details the Americanization of California during and post-Gold Rush, such as Patricia Nelson Limerick's *Legacy of Conquest*, *Making San Francisco American* and *Mud, Blood and Gold* and Susan Lee Johnson's *Roaring Camps: the Social World of the California Gold Rush*. These texts each trace the arrival of decidedly American identity to San Francisco in the later stages of the Gold Rush, and by examining their arguments with a feminist approach they could be understood as detailing the arrival of white patriarchal power to San Francisco from the Eastern centered U.S. culture of the era. Once the railroad, telegraph and American government reached San Francisco, white patriarchy was able to establish control over the city and disempower the women and men and women of color that had, in its absence, gained prominence in San Francisco during the Gold Rush.



## Overview

This thesis attempts to reexamine the rosy myth of the American West, and more particularly the vice, which Helper and so many others enjoyed and reported on in the West. Albert Bernard de Russailh, who also experienced early Gold Rush San Francisco first hand wrote in his diary that “it [was] easy for pleasure loving people to find amusement in San Francisco.”<sup>9</sup> Regardless of one’s personal proclivities for the vice that Gold Rush San Francisco offered, namely prostitution and gambling, its prominence in the city was undeniable. And while vice in the city was extremely prominent at the time, it is not fair to say that during the process of *Americanizing* the city that all vice vanished. Legalized prostitution, however, did. Why prostitution and not, say, liquor? By examining the dramatic rise and even more dramatic fall of prostitution, the personal rise and fall of madams of Gold Rush San Francisco is evidence of the imposition of race and gender hierarchies on the West by the process of federal incorporation.

The Gold Rush certainly earned its name; the era was gold, in its decadence and brilliance, and a rush, in both its brevity and urgency. When the gold mines and stores had been mostly depleted and the Rush came to an end, so, too, did the era of the once prominent San Francisco madam. While the window of success for the madam was brief, the enduring legacy of the madam has remained prominent throughout American history. In order to better understand the true identity of the madam and how American values

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<sup>9</sup> Albert Benard de Russailh. *Last adventure: San Francisco in 1851 ; translated from the original journal of Albert Benard de Russailh by Clarkson Crane*. The Westgate Press: 1931.

have created an inaccurate rendering of the madam in fiction, Belle Cora and Ah Toy's lives should be read as both fitting and contradicting the image of the madam.

The first chapter of this thesis will provide a biography of Belle Cora's life as a madam in San Francisco, followed next by the same for Ah Toy. The first chapter providing Cora's biography very closely resembles the biography of the mythic American Western madam. Ah Toy's biography, however, diverges considerably from that of the iconic madam, and is evidence of the how the trope of madam has been created and replicated in American fiction to reflect an accessible, alluring and non-threatening form of an independent woman — namely a white one . Belle Cora and Ah Toy's biographies should be held up to the myth of madam and be viewed, in how they converge and diverge with each other and with the imagination of the madam, as reflective of American values in both their historical and the modern era.

## Belle Cora

Arabella Ryan, the daughter of an illustrious Baltimore minister, arrived in San Francisco in 1849 on the arm of her Italian Catholic lover Charles Cora. She was 22, nicknamed Belle, and according to Detective Bohen, “a voluptuous creature.”<sup>10</sup> She had come from New Orleans aboard the steamer *Falcon*, where Charles had been a well known gambler and Belle a lesser known prostitute.<sup>11</sup> As vice laws did not exist in Gold Rush San Francisco until 1854, the Coras found great success in San Francisco through their respective vices, and during their seven years of prominence in San Francisco each garnered a sizeable fortune through their respective trades—gambling and prostitution.

As an iconic figure for women’s empowerment in the American West, the madam, through the lens of Belle Cora, was not in fact entirely independent. In order to subvert the power of patriarchy, Cora relied heavily on her partner, Charles, and in this way reveals that the legacy of the madam, as historicized and reproduced through fiction, was not an entirely independent actor.

Not only was vice not criminalized it was also socially acceptable and celebrated. Belle Cora, financed by Charles, quickly translated her expertise as a prostitute to become the city’s most successful madam, opening a parlour house on Dupont Street. In doing so, Belle made herself into one of Gold Rush San Francisco’s greatest celebrities. In the second history H.H. Bancroft wrote of California, he described Cora:

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<sup>10</sup> Gentry, Curt. *The Madams of San Francisco; an Irreverent History of the City by the Golden Gate*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964. pg. 78.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 78

Like Cleopatra, she was very beautiful, and, beside the power that comes with beauty, rich...Flaunting her beauty and wealth on the gayest thoroughfares, and on every gay occasion, with senator, judge, and citizen at her beck and call...She was what she was, God only knows how or why.<sup>12</sup>

Bancroft, here, is describing Cora as much as he is the stereotypical madam of the American imagination. Rich, intoxicatingly beautiful, charming, and polarizing, Cora's character subscribed to the mold of madam that has been memorialized in history. As the city's first madam, however, it could more accurately be said that Cora lent her character entirely to the trope of madam in the legacy of the American West. The image of the madam of the American West was built around Cora, and other young white madam's, lived experience.

The parlour house's luxury and glamour rivaled those of the illustrious New Orleans brothels from which she came and was unabashedly frequented by powerful members of the city's political and economic elite<sup>13</sup>. Frank Soule's *The Annals of San Francisco* described her parlour house:

All the fixtures are of a keeping, most expensive, most voluptuous, most gorgeous, the favorite ones with the same class of humanity, whose dress and decorations have made so significant ever since the name of their city and trade, 'Babylon'.

While Belle Cora's first parlour house on Dupont burned down less than a year after its construction, she was able to rebuild quickly in Waverly Place near Pike Street. The new business was modeled in the same luxurious fashion.<sup>14</sup> The decadence that Cora offered

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<sup>12</sup> Hubert Howe Bancroft, *Popular Tribunals, Vol. II*

<sup>13</sup> Barnhart, Jacqueline Baker. *Working Women: Prostitution in San Francisco from the Gold Rush to 1900*. Ann Arbor, 1976. Pg. 69

<sup>14</sup> Gentry, Curt. *The Madams of San Francisco; an Irreverent History of the City by the Golden Gate*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964. pg. 83.

in her parlour house attracted a high class clientele, and regular parties and balls hosted there reflected the overall social acceptance of prostitution during this era in San Francisco. Cora relied heavily on Charles for financial assistance and financed the venture with money made from his gambling.

Following the simple rules of supply and demand, Cora and her employees were able to charge handsomely for their services, and in doing so she and Charles became one of the richest couples in the city. Because of the extremely high price of her worker's services, only the best to do San Franciscans could regularly patronize Belle Cora's parlour house. The costs were paid in the physical gold itself — weighed on a scale in the parlour house. Because women were so scarce in San Francisco, as well as the rest of California, the demand for their sex work was extremely high. Quickly, Cora came to epitomize the image of a Western madam: white, beautiful, powerful and seemingly independent.

Belle Cora's success as a madam was usual for 19th-century women. Until 1839 American women legally were bound to their husbands with no access to own their own property or earnings under the common law legal system of coverture.<sup>15</sup> This system forced women to surrender their rights to their husbands upon marriage. Even after the passage of the Married Women Acts beginning in 1839, women, married or not, were extremely limited in their ability to be financially or socially independent or successful in their own right. In this American era, the novel climate of the Gold Rush and its absence

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<sup>15</sup>Richard H. Chused, "Married Women's Property Law: 1800-1850," *Georgetown Law Journal* 71 (1983): 1359, 1366.



of systems of American law and order, allowed for women, like Belle Cora, to remain unmarried, become wealthy and powerful economic actors in their own right. While she was initially reliant on Charles for financial and social support, coming from New Orleans Belle Cora's choice to remain unmarried along with her entrepreneurship were her greatest acts of political independence.

Not only was Cora financially quite successful through her work as madam of her own parlour house, her work made her socially and politically prominent and visible in San Francisco. While her name is largely forgotten in San Francisco history, it was certainly well known amongst her contemporary San Franciscans, whether spoken with spite, ill repute, admiration, or lust. Cora's close connections with her upper-crust customer base allowed her great social visibility and great social and political power in the city, as well as a direct counsel in the ear of several California legislators, then, despite certain scorn for her profession. Indeed, many looked upon Cora as a fixture in the community providing a high quality, much sought after service.

In her first five years as a madam, Belle Cora's famous soirees were patronized by "principal gentlemen of the city, including collector of the port, mayor, aldermen, judges of the county, and members of the legislature."<sup>16</sup> Even after the passage of the first vice laws which criminalized prostitution in 1854, Cora was able to continue running her parlour house relatively undisturbed largely because of her strong connections to

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<sup>16</sup> Soulé Frank, John H Gihon, and James Nisbet. 1855. *The Annals of San Francisco : Containing a Summary of the History of the First Discovery, Settlement, Porgress, and Present Condition of California, and a Complete History of All the Important Events Connected with Its Great City : To Which Are Added, Biographical Memoirs of Some Prominent Citizens*. New York: D. Appleton & Company.

powerful members of the San Francisco politic. Through her role as madam during the prime Gold Rush years, Belle Cora was not only financially quite powerful, but politically as well, which protected her from violence and legal action. But Cora's ability and success existed, according to historian Barbara Berglund's definition, in the city of San Francisco that was pre-American, and as the city became more and more regulated, or more American, this era would come to a close<sup>17</sup>

Beginning with her arrival in the city, Cora and her comrades were never without their critics. In the early years of the Gold Rush, hearing word of and fearing the vice in the new city, several reverends and pastors went west not seeking gold, but seeking reformation of what they saw as a bloom in crime against God and movement towards hell. Reverend William Taylor was one of these men, arriving in San Francisco with his family in September of 1849 to fix what he saw as corruption so evil it was a sign of the Second Coming.<sup>18</sup> Facing the vice in San Francisco and his frustration finding a reliable base of constituents, Taylor wrote "California in general, and...San Francisco in particular, is...as yet, the hardest country in the world in which to get sinners converted to God."<sup>19</sup> While Thomas found Gold Rush San Franciscans essentially lost in terms of conversion to Godliness and condemnation of vice, his view would soon take hold in a way that disempowered Cora and was predicated on delegitimizing and criminalizing this

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<sup>17</sup> Berglund, Barbara. 2007. *Making San Francisco American : Cultural Frontiers in the Urban West, 1846-1906*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.  
<http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0716/2007015902.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Gentry, Curt. *The Madams of San Francisco; an Irreverent History of the City by the Golden Gate*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964. Pg. 41

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, William. *Seven Years Preaching in San Francisco, California*. New York: Carlton and Porter. 1856. pg. 352.

form of labor.

In June of 1851, a group of likeminded, native-born Protestant San Francisco men, mostly motivated by shared aggravation towards foreign laborers of color, formed as the San Francisco Vigilance Committee. While the initial committee of 700 men did target prostitution, it initially ignored both Belle and Charles Cora and confined its efforts on eradicating vice establishments that catered to and were patronized by people of color. As the committee grew and time passed in San Francisco, the committee used violence and vigilantism to impose a racial hierarchy on the uniquely diverse city. The committee's lynchings of several immigrant men between 1851 and 1853 were investigated by San Francisco police, but no one would testify in the public courts. The city's first anti-prostitution law was passed in 1854 but "was enforced almost exclusively against the Mexican, Chileans, and Chinese"<sup>20</sup> The threat that the San Francisco Vigilance Committee posed to immigrants and people of color in San Francisco established the social governing power of white-patriarchy in the city. After its successful exile and execution of "undesirable" citizens, the Committee went mostly silent. Eventually the gold ran out, and the men returned home. But before the final Bust and concession that the Gold was gone, the Committee turned on the Coras.

In 1856, the Committee revived under the banner of anti-vice, rather an anti-immigration rhetoric. The Committee acted to assert patriarchal power as it had with white, Protestant supremacy. After lynching several non-Anglo American men in the first year of the 1850s and deporting sex workers of non-Anglo descent, the Committee

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<sup>20</sup> Gentry, Curt. 85.

was assured in their ability to bypass and undermine police authority in their renewed attack on sex work as a profession. This was tantamount to an attack on the idea of female independence. In fact, the Committee's membership in 1856 was largely comprised of male police officers and politicians.<sup>21</sup> That partnership between the Vigilance Committee and the police signaled the downfall of the Coras. To understand the significance of this downfall, the power dynamic of the Cora's relationship need be traced. While Belle was celebrated as an independent and self-made woman, she was in fact reliant on Charles not only financially, but socially.

On November 15, 1855, Charles and Belle Cora were seated at the theater on the first balcony, awaiting the premiere of *Nicodemus; or The Unfortunate Fisherman*<sup>22</sup> and providing a spectacle of their own to the audience seated below them. The theater was still relatively new to this new city, but the balconied arrangement of seats was even newer, arriving from the American East Coast and symbolizing the Americanization of San Francisco. The first balcony, or the proscenium boxes, were the most expensive and most visible seats to the crowd gathered below in the general admission floor and the even cheaper pit.<sup>23</sup> On this November night, Belle and Charles were seated in their usual position there and Belle, famous madam that she was, was the recipient of many a wave, smile, laugh and wink from men seated below her in the less expensive seats. This seating arrangement reflected Belle Cora's social status, and her iconic madam's, status

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<sup>21</sup> Caughey, John, and Doyce B. Nunis. *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 22, no. 2 (1972): 62-63. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4517684>.

<sup>22</sup> Gentry, Curt. 84.

<sup>23</sup> The Theater of the Gold Rush Decade in San Francisco," 1935, Joseph Gaer.

socially and her place in historical memory —pedestaled and celebrated. She was also distanced from observers in ways that obscured her real character and circumstances.

Belle was no stranger to gestures of welcome and acknowledgement, and both her seated position in the theater and her warm reception from the men below were perfectly exemplary of her status as a San Francisco madam. She was revered, she was loved, and she was highly visible. But this night would be the Cora's last night in the theater, and it would be Belle's last night in any spotlight that flattered her. The reception that Belle warmly received from the men seated below her infuriated and embarrassed Mrs.

William Richardson, who, seated directly in front of Belle, misinterpreted the men's lewd attention as directed towards her. Her husband, U.S. Marshall William Richardson, descended from the upper balcony to silence the men, and then returned to the first balcony with a demand that the Coras leave the theater. The Coras considered their social power as superior to that of the U.S. Marshall's, and refused. The manager similarly chose not to expel the Coras. The Richardsons, infuriated, left. The Coras enjoyed the play and while they won this battle it was only to lose the war.

The next afternoon, Charles Cora and William Richardson encountered each other on the street. This encounter, much like the one in the theater, sparked a conflict between the Coras and the Richardsons, but the men were the only active actors. While Belle's reputation had been the motivating force behind the conflict, Charles defense of her and by extension, his own, honor, was the driving force. The theater was an arena in which both men enjoyed essentially equal, very differently afforded, acclaim, but in public, in broad daylight, the power dynamic was very different. Charles Cora's popularity and

economic success had been waning since the criminalization of his vice for gambling, just as the U.S. Marshall Richardson's power and influence had been expanding. After years of successful governmental and legal establishment in San Francisco, a defining factor in what can be considered the Americanization of the city, U.S. Marshalls held significant legal, governmental and policing power — defunct gamblers held essentially none. Charles Cora did not acknowledge this, and while their first exchange of words on this day was peaceful, the day would end with the execution of Charles and Belle's fall from financial, social and historical grace.

William Richardson and Charles Cora met each other by chance not once, but twice, the day following the Cora's and Richardson's dispute in the theater — a dispute which, more than just an embarrassment to the Marshall and his wife, was symbolic of the very disparate and very quickly changing character of the city's social and political elite. Though reputedly fueled by rage and a quest for vengeance upon the Coras for the episode at the theater, when Richardson first encountered Charles the two attempted reconciliation, took a drink, and parted ways.<sup>24</sup>

Merely hours later, though, the scuffle between the men was rekindled. Meeting by chance for the second time outside Montgomery Street's Blue Wing Saloon on Clay Street, they fell to blows. While varying accounts exist, the result of the conflict was that Charles shot the U.S. Marshall, who had been unarmed. In the hazily historicized encounter of these two men, iconically and mythologically opposed as outlaw and officer,

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<sup>24</sup> Benson, Bruce L. 1998. *To Serve and Protect : Privatization and Community in Criminal Justice*. The Political Economy of the Austrian School. New York: New York University Press. 110-11.

both men were fighting for their own honor and the honor of their female companions. Armed conflict and shootouts between outlaws and U.S. law enforcement is as much part of the myth of the American West as the madam is. The actions of Charles Cora and William Richardson were motivated to protect their honor, and the honor of their wives was clearly wrapped up in their own. Charles' action, then, must be understood as reflective of his relationship with Belle, to whom he had always been lover, protector, financier and partner.

Charles' arrest exposed the degree to which Cora was or was not truly independent. With assistance from a senator and patron of her parlour house, James Alexander MacDougall, Belle hired a reputable lawyer and according to accounts, bribed her and Charles' way to a hung jury.<sup>25</sup> The first trial did not sentence Charles, but this victory was brief and both of the Cora's last; Charles' second trial found him guilty, and his jury sentenced him to death.

The end of the literal and symbolic era of the madam did not end here. Belle's social and economic life and power perished quickly as Charles was sentenced and executed. A U.S. Marshall was killed by a known, though respected, outlaw in a city that was, in 1855, at the end of its fantastical and mythicized, literally golden era of vice, rapidly falling out of the hands of the gambling halls and parlour houses the Cora's benefited from and into the hands of Richardson and other agents of what evolved as the American politic. The mercurial nature of the interactions between the Coras and the

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<sup>25</sup> Farr, James. "Not Exactly a Hero: James Alexander McDougall in the United States Senate." *California History* 65, no. 2 (1986): 104-13. doi:10.2307/25158368.

Richardsons in only 36 hours in the early winter of 1855 was largely symbolic of that periodic struggle for power in the San Francisco in 1855, the age in which San Francisco teetered between both Gold Rush and Gold Bust, between a uniquely Western and a natural identity. The events of November marked the death of the city that was Gold Rush San Francisco. "The prosecution repeatedly stated that Cora had besmirched the image of California, as if it were not Charles Cora alone who was on trial, nor even just Charles and Belle, but gold rush San Francisco — its manners, mores, excesses and failures,"<sup>26</sup> the Coras loss was not just theirs, but Gold Rush San Francisco's.

In her attempts to exonerate Charles, Belle spent a great deal of her finite fortune. Belle's immense financial expenditure and loss in attempting to exonerate Charles, coupled with her loss of patronage due to the publicity of the trial and scandal forced Cora to close her parlour house. Without Charles, who had consistently provided her with financial support, Cora had no one to bail her out. A city that for a decade glimmered with the opulence of the women and the glitter of the gold now cast those vices into the dark annals of history, and with it the success and memory of Belle Cora.

Belle's dramatic persona, ascension and eventual demise was paralleled by the demise of Gold Rush San Francisco, beginning with her establishment of the first of Gold Rush San Francisco's many parlour houses, ending with Charles' execution on May 22, 1856. The morning of his execution, Belle Cora married Charles in order to inherit his estate, in an act of uncharacteristic independence.<sup>2728</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Gentry, Curt. 93.

<sup>27</sup> Bekeart, Phil B. "Corrections and Addenda to the Article on the Vigilance Committee, San Francisco, 1856." *California Historical Society Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (1929): 364-73



While Belle, a fiercely and independently wealthy and successful social actor and fixture in Gold Rush San Francisco appreciated and flaunted her power in her Gold Rush city, her husband's execution figuratively and immediately killed her own reputation. That Belle's at once famous, infamous, glorious, wretched, and very successful run as a madam, a queen and boss of vice in Gold Rush San Francisco, ended by the simple loss of her male counterpart has great significance in understanding just how independent madams were. Charles' execution was symbolic of the changing values of the city as it became more typically American, and this transition fundamentally relied upon the removal of the threatening Belle Cora - a woman of means, status and prestige - contradicted the patriarchal system that was employed to make and keep San Francisco *American*.

The successful institutionalization of fundamentally American hierarchical attitudes toward gender, race and class to Gold Rush San Francisco stripped Belle of her power. Because of the extreme and dramatic shift in her rise and fall from power, Belle's life is symbolic of the greater and persistent disempowerment of women in American history. Particularly evidenced by her lack of modern notoriety, Belle, as an individual and a symbol, demonstrates how American patriarchy not only informs but naturalizes and regenerates itself in American popular thought through selectionist and patriarchal historicism.

Belle Cora was perhaps the richest and most famous of Gold Rush San

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<sup>28</sup> Jolly, Michelle E. "The Price of Vigilance." *Pacific Historical Review* 73, no. 4 (2004): 541-80. doi:10.1525/phr.2004.73.4.541.

Francisco's madams, and her legacy conforms the the image of the madam of the Wild West: she was just independent enough to appear inspiring but dependent on her male companion just enough to be non-threatening. Her Gold Rush success followed by dramatic Gold Bust disempowerment and disenfranchisement is perfectly exemplary of how of gender, race and class hierarchies are the root of American power and the extent to which they can be subverted. In pre-American San Francisco, Belle earned and enjoyed great power and influence by relying heavily on Charles, but with the Americanization of the city came with it the need to exert and exercise power according to the American white patriarchy. As the supply of power is finite, in order to reify this hierarchy, power needed be removed from the hands of individuals who did not belong to this group. Belle Cora's ascent and descent exemplifies not only the Gold Rush phenomenon that allowed women positions of power or the development of San Francisco as an American city, but also the way that white patriarchy as the ultimate and prevailing law of the land, left those who did not fit the mold dead, destitute, or devoid of any and all power they once enjoyed and were celebrated for.

## Ah Toy

In February of 1848, the steamer ship “The Eagle” brought the first Chinese woman to San Francisco. This woman was employed as a domestic servant to a merchant family, and her name has been lost to history. Sometime later that year, two more Chinese women arrived, one of whose name and reputation quickly became well known throughout the Gold Rush city: Ah Toy, was twenty years old when she emigrated as young prostitute from Canton. For several years, these three women were the only Chinese women in the state of California, but Ah Toy quickly found companionship among the men of Gold Rush San Francisco.

Shortly after her arrival, Ah Toy rented a small residence in an alley off Clay Street near what she helped grow into a flourishing Chinatown. From her home, Ah Toy worked independently as a prostitute, and while Chinese women were extraordinarily rare in San Francisco the Gold Rush city, which was largely white and largely male, the men of the city took a quick liking to her. Despite growing anti-Chinese sentiment in the city in which she arrived, she was able to gain popularity as a sex worker, and with it, economic independence. Within her first three months in the city, Ah Toy’s residence was known throughout the city and easily recognized by a line, sometimes stretching a block long, of men waiting for her services.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Gentry, Curt. 1964. *The Madams of San Francisco: An Irreverent History of the City by the Golden Gate*. [1st ed.]. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.

Ah Toy's rise to fame, or infamy, depending on perspective, was unprecedented in Gold Rush San Francisco. Her dramatic rise to acclaim had never before been seen, nor capitalized on in the way that Ah Toy did. In a city and state that discriminated heavily against Chinese men, of which there were many, Ah Toy, a Chinese woman, arrived in a city that was poised to hate her. However, through her personal prostitution and development of the city's first successful brothel, Ah Toy gained both social, political and financial success that men and women, of all ethnicities, did not all enjoy but could not deny, and complicated the image of the iconic madam because she was a woman of color.

Business savvy and sex work allowed Ah Toy enormous opportunity for almost a decade in Gold Rush San Francisco, but as the city's demographic normalized it became more typically American,<sup>30</sup> acquiring and legislating the racist, sexist and shameful attitudes towards sex work that came with it. Much like Belle Cora, who arrived in the city four years after Ah Toy, the end of the Gold Rush signified a distinctive change in attitudes towards their work and the women themselves, not only shaming but legally forcing them from their careers as madams. Ah Toy propelled herself into a world of wealth, social and legal power in Gold Rush San Francisco, but as she did so the historical era of madam's success ended in history. Her ability to face and overcome the end of the era of the madam, and continue her life thereafter, stands in direct contrast with Cora's succumbing to the imposition of the white power structure. Ah Toy, unlike

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<sup>30</sup>Berglund, Barbara. 2007. *Making San Francisco American : Cultural Frontiers in the Urban West, 1846-1906*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

Cora, was uniquely and extraordinarily independent, and when it was no longer viable to be a madam, Ah Toy was still able to adapt and survive.

When news of Ah Toy's ascent to success in the city as a young, unmarried woman, her independently powerful status was first officially challenged. Within the first year of her arrival, a man in Hong Kong wrote to leaders of the Chinese community in the San Francisco alleging to be her husband. This incident marked her first appearance of many in the American judicial system. Ah Toy, upon hearing such claims from this man in Hong Kong, chose to defend herself in the San Francisco court, denying such claims and asking the judge to allow her to remain in San Francisco to better her life. Her boldness in doing so, as a known prostitute in the Gold Rush city foreshadowed her life of aggressive courage. Ah Toy won her case.<sup>31</sup> Not only was this verdict indicative of Ah Toy's power and independence, but also reflective of the city's attitudes towards sex work in that historical moment: with so few women to work as sex workers, prostitution was valuable work.

After Ah Toy first appeared in San Francisco courts in 1849, she became increasingly comfortable with, and empowered to utilize, the San Francisco judiciary, enough so, at least, to use it to file her own complaints in court against customers. What was most reported on, however, was Ah Toy's manner of dress and physical appearance. Still one of only two Chinese women in the city, the courtroom, reporters, and readers of the newspapers were fascinated by Ah Toy's "apricot satin jacket and willow green pantaloons, with a colorful pair of tabis on her small tightly bound feet." Not only was

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<sup>31</sup> Gentry, Curt. 52-54.

her outfit exoticized in Gold Rush San Francisco in a way that helped her explode to greater fame, but her body as well. Never before had the city seen a Chinese woman in a courtroom, or anywhere of social or political prominence.

Still working independently as a prostitute out of her domicile, later in the year of 1849 Ah Toy registered a complaint in Judge George Baker's Court against several of her clients for cheating her out of payment of gold, which she took and weighed herself. Though newspapers were still too bashful to be explicit in the reporting of her work, using euphemism for sex such as— "[her customers] came to gaze upon the countenance of the charming Ah Toy" — Ah Toy herself was not, and used the courtroom to prove so. To Judge George Baker, Ah Toy explained that several of her customers had been paying for her services in brass filings rather than in gold, cheating her out of payment. By filing criminal charges in Judge Baker courtroom, Ah Toy effectively revealed her profession. This brashness about her line of work was not unique, Cora also was open about her work, but to utilize the judicial system to your advantage was exceptional. Ah Toy used the courts to exercise her freedom of enterprise, which illustrates her sense of entitlement and self-empowerment. In the courts, she challenged the American hierarchies that structure the American imagination.

Although Judge George Baker denied Ah Toy's complaint, in his courtroom Ah Toy became a celebrity of Gold Rush San Francisco. Her charisma and boldness were noted by newspapers recording the case: when asked to name the exact customers who had defrauded her Ah Toy not only named names but physically pointed fingers at several men in the courtroom. This dauntlessness was recorded in the papers, and

reflected, again, relatively positive attitudes and a fair amount of respect for and of sex work and workers in the Gold Rush city.

Like Cora, however, Ah Toy's profession was not unanimously accepted by Gold Rush San Francisco. Her third appearance in a San Francisco courtroom was to face charges for the nuisance that her popularity as a prostitute caused her neighbors. Several men who lived in the same alley off Clay Street brought charges against Ah Toy in 1850, however, since prostitution was not criminal in Gold Rush San Francisco Judge R. H. Waller dismissed the complaints. While the charges were dropped, this official filing of complaint against Ah Toy was the first of many complaints in what became a successful campaign against Ah Toy personally and prostitution in general in San Francisco.

1850 was a turning point in the Ah Toy's time in San Francisco for several reasons. Not only because she was first tried in court, but also because in 1850 five more Chinese women arrived in San Francisco. Of these five, two went to work for Ah Toy. With these two women seeking out Ah Toy and gaining employment as prostitutes, Ah Toy successfully transitioned from self-employed prostitute to a Gold Rush madam, making her the second in the history of the city only after Belle Cora. Not only did this transition allow her to become more financially successful, but it also marked a dramatic transition in her social power — as a madam, and not just an independent prostitute, she was an employer in the Gold Rush city in a vice industry that was not only incredibly in demand and lucrative, but legal and largely socially acceptable. In 1850, taking on her first two employees, Ah Toy became an even more powerful actor in Gold Rush San Francisco's prostitution economy, beginning a quick ascent to one of the city's most

powerful madams.<sup>32</sup> With two women now under her employ, Ah Toy moved from her small shanty to a larger home on Pike Street, an alley off of Clay Street. This location in San Francisco served as the epicenter of the city's brothels until the 1920s, and Ah Toy pioneered the vice in the area.

1850 was also the year that Ah Toy became a wife. The *Alta* newspaper, on May 22, 1850, reported that Ah Toy "married, in Sonoma" a Mr. Henry Conrad. This, however, is the only significant reference to Henry Conrad, and it was thought that before the years end that Ah Toy had taken a lover. Not only did Ah Toy become a madam in San Francisco in 1850, she married and left her husband. This year was a mark of radical empowerment in the life of Ah Toy, becoming both financially and socially more successful and defying typical gender roles that limited her contemporary women in America.

Ah Toy's glory days did not last long. 1851 was the beginning of her decline. Not just Ah Toy's life was changed in 1851, but the entire city of Gold Rush San Francisco's fate was changed by the formation of the San Francisco Vigilance Committee. The San Francisco Vigilance Committee was a band of men in the city that came together under the banner of imposing law and order on a city that, in their eyes, saw little of it through the police force. The group, though supposedly gathered under good intentions to rid the city of rampant crime, acted extralegally to accuse, arrest, try, and even execute many Gold Rush San Franciscans. This Vigilance Committee, composed entirely, at its

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<sup>32</sup> Wilson, Carol (Green). 1931. *Chinatown Quest: The Life Adventures of Donaldina Cameron*. Stanford University, Calif.: Stanford University Press.



initiation, of white men, imposed their ideals on the city in a way that markedly changed its character and launched it on a path towards Americanization<sup>33</sup> and institutional and social white patriarchal order and control.<sup>34</sup>

The 1851 Vigilance Committee gathered initially to address the dramatic influx of violent immigrants to San Francisco, focusing primarily on the rise in Australian immigration. Australia, at the time, was still a penal colony, and the Gold Rush lured a wave of ex-convicts to California, the men being labelled “Sydney Ducks”. The Sydney Ducks were accused of setting fires to the city of San Francisco twice already by the year of 1851, and the arson was supposedly to cover up a larceny of crimes they had commit in the city. While the validity of these claims were challenged, not only by the Sydney Ducks themselves but by other inhabitants of Gold Rush San Francisco, the Vigilance Committee felt the accusations were substantiated, and formed in order to find and punish the culprits of the arson.<sup>35</sup> During the summer of 1851, in the first months of its existence, the Vigilance Committee hung four men. The formation of the Vigilance Committee resulted in several extra-lawful executions, which sent a ripple and a resounding change through the city of Gold Rush San Francisco. Reflecting the growing class, gender, ethnic and racial tensions, the formation of the Vigilance Committee was a harbinger of what was to come for the diverse and disorderly city — a system of order predicated upon the

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<sup>33</sup> Berglund, Barbara. 2007. *Making San Francisco American : Cultural Frontiers in the Urban West, 1846-1906*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

<sup>34</sup> Williams, Mary Floyd. 1921. *History of the San Francisco Committee of Vigilance of 1851 : A Study of Social Control on the California Frontier in the Days of the Gold Rush*. University of California publications in history, v. 12. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.

<sup>35</sup> Bateson, Charles. 1963. *Gold Fleet for California: Forty-Niners from Australia and New Zealand*. Sydney: U. Smith.

naturalization of race and gender and the subjugation of those who did not belong to the elite white patriarchy — those like Ah Toy. Not only were her contemporaries threatened by her socio-economic power, this attitude clearly has endured throughout time. The image of the American madam is in many ways contradicted by Ah Toy's biography, and the exception of her character in the formation of a mythical Western madam perpetuates this insecurity with her independence from gendered and racialized hierarchies.

While prostitution was not only legal but incredibly popular in San Francisco in 1851, it certainly was not without its critics. In the years following the Gold boom in 1848, the city struggled to navigate very diverse and disparate systems of values. As vice flourished in early Gold Rush San Francisco, the assembly of the Vigilance Committee in 1851 not only condemned but criminalized gambling and prostitution, seeking to rid the city of it altogether. After successfully addressing what the Committee saw as the Australian immigration problem through outright criminal vigilantism, the group had gained significantly more members and a renewed sense of purpose.

The formation of the Vigilance Committee was organized around targeting, alienating, deporting, criminalizing and executing a demographic of a single ethnicity, and the precedent that the Committee set in their persecution of Australians set the precedent for a hierarchical sociopolitical system in San Francisco that next turned on the city's Chinese population. Particularly taking offense with prostitution, the Committee employed a special patrol, headed by John A. Clark, to investigate the city's prostitution and brothels. Vice, as the Committee saw it, was the primary way in which Gold Rush San Francisco differed from other American cities; women, even women of color like Ah

Toy, were able to gain social and economic power, and this power had to be thwarted in order for the white male Vigilance Committee to instate its sanction of rule on the city.

In 1851, as the city's first Vigilance Committee turned towards the Chinese population in San Francisco, it specialized its interest not only on a specific ethnicity, but focused even more closely on gender, targeting Chinese women. Ah Toy, by then a well known prostitute turned madam in Gold Rush San Francisco, became prime target because she epitomized all they opposed: the subversion of gender and racial hierarchies.

John Clark, the special investigator of prostitution for the Vigilance Committee, did not follow through with the deportation once he met Ah Toy in person. Instead, he was utterly charmed by her. Rather than investigating, trying and deporting Ah Toy, as the Committee did to the male Chinese pimps Ah Lo and Ah Hone. John Clark and Ah Toy became lovers.<sup>36</sup> Here, too, Ah Toy's biography stands in direct contrast with Belle Cora's. Like Cora, she came to enjoy the protection of a man through his sexual companionship. However, Ah Toy's manipulation of the Vigilance Committee through Clark reflects her calculated and enterprising nature, both of which portrayed her as being *too* independent, independent in a way that made her character threatening to American hierarchies themselves. This relationship gave Ah Toy the socio-political connection she needed to avoid the Vigilance Committee for several years and even to expand her business.

Despite the significant benefit from her relationship with John Clark, anti-Chinese sentiment was growing and Ah Toy could not insulate herself from it. During this era,

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<sup>36</sup> Dillon, Richard H.: *The Hatchetmen*. New York: Coward-McCann; 1962.

San Francisco was home to an estimated 12,000 Chinese men, but between 1850 and 1852 this population increased dramatically. Fleeing the Taiping Rebellion, a two decade long civil war in Canton, as well as famine throughout the country, Chinese immigration to San Francisco exploded.<sup>37</sup> With this greater influx of Chinese immigrants, racial biases against them grew. “[The Chinese] were now beginning to arrive in considerable numbers, bringing with them a number of their women, who are among the filthiest and most abandoned of their sex,” wrote Frank Soule describing San Francisco in 1851.<sup>38</sup> With this growing Chinese population and growing racism in the city, Chinese women at this moment in San Francisco history were made vulnerable.

Ah Toy, despite the growing bigotry she was facing, continued to successfully utilize the legal system to successfully prosecute two men in the year of 1851. First she accused Norman Assing, a Chinatown leader and mob boss, of attempting to tax her and her employees in order to control them. She served as her own counsel, and she won her case.<sup>39</sup> In December of 1851, Ah Toy again appeared in court, accusing a customer of stealing from her brothel a diamond pin. The fact that Ah Toy exercised civil liberties to this extent is impressive enough considering the incredible racism and sexism she was facing in the city, but the case itself is even more illustrative of Ah Toy’s dramatically extensive power. The *Alta* newspaper printed on December 11, 1851 explained that when

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<sup>37</sup> Gentry, Curt. 55

<sup>38</sup> Soulé, Frank, John H. Gihon, and James Nisbet. 1855. *The Annals of San Francisco : Containing a Summary of the History of the First Discovery, Settlement, Progress, and Present Condition of California, and a Complete History of All the Important Events Connected with Its Great City : To Which Are Added, Biographical Memoirs of Some Prominent Citizens*. New York: D. Appleton & Company.

<sup>39</sup> Levy, JoAnn. 1990. *They Saw the Elephant : Women in the California Gold Rush*. Hamden, Ct.: Archon Books. 167-168.

the suspect ran from Ah Toy's residence with the pin, Ah Toy pursued him herself, writing that "Atoy was too swift for him, seized him by the collar very much in the style of a police officer, and demanded [the] diamond pin." Bystanders, after witnessing the incident, marched the suspect off to the police station. This case not only reflected Ah Toy's access to and comfort within the San Francisco legal system, but her incredible boldness and personal fortitude and strength. While the myth of the madam can imagine her inside a courtroom, her presence there would be only to defend herself. Ah Toy's choice and ability to use the legal system to her own benefit does not fit within the image of an American Western madam, again reflecting that her autonomy was threatening not only in her historical era, but long after, and is therefore rarely remembered as part of the historical image of a madam.

In 1852, a new wave of Chinese immigration hit San Francisco, for which many held Ah Toy responsible. Several hundred Chinese girls and women arrived in the city, many slaves, many prostitutes, and Ah Toy's brothel expanded.<sup>40</sup> While the number of women and girls in Ah Toy's employ is impossible to discern, she opened a string of brothels and continued until 1854 to import girls and women to San Francisco to work for her as prostitutes. Despite increasing anti-Chinese sentiment in the city, Ah Toy's power as a madam continued to grow between 1852 and 1854.

In the same year her empire of sex work grew, Ah Toy filed charges in San Francisco courts on three separate occasions. These three appearances in 1852, however, would be her last appearances in San Francisco courts as the plaintiff rather than the

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<sup>40</sup> Gentry, Curt. 56.

defendant. First of the two complaints Ah Toy filed that year she complained to Judge Edward McGowan that John Clark had beaten her after she accidentally disclosed their love affair to a friend, and she arrived in the courtroom clearly battered and bruised. He owed her money, apparently, as well, but Ah Toy was not interested in the repayment of this money, instead she requested that the court mandate John Clark apologize to her. Here, Ah Toy was not successful, Judge McGowan had no legal ability to compel Clark to apologize to Ah Toy. Later in the year, Ah Toy served as the defense counsel for a Chinese woman, likely an employee of hers, who had beaten a man for failing to pay “debts of honor”<sup>41</sup> and was prosecuted for the assault. While she was not successful in exonerating her client, Ah Toy’s volunteer as legal counsel reflected a huge amount of confidence within the legal system, as well as reflected the large social respect she commanded.

During her last trial of 1852, Ah Toy enjoyed her last victory in the San Francisco legal system. Like she had the year prior, Ah Toy again filed charges against a powerful Chinese boss for trying to impose illegal taxes on Chinese women, and again she won. This legal victory, her second in two years against powerful Chinese men, was demonstrative of her true skill in the courtroom. Reporting her victory over the Chinatown boss’s attempts at taxation, the *Alta* wrote that “Miss Atoy knows a thing or two...and she cannot be easily humbugged into any such measures.”<sup>42</sup> That much was

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<sup>41</sup> Gentry, Curt. 57.

<sup>42</sup> Levy, JoAnn. 1990. *They Saw the Elephant : Women in the California Gold Rush*. Hamden, Ct.: Archon Books. 168.

extraordinarily clear about Ah Toy, she was an incredibly enterprising and empowered Chinese woman in a culture that hugely marginalized her identity.

In the two years immediately following 1852, Ah Toy enjoyed a large measure of success as a madam. She lived outside of Chinatown, only blocks away from Belle Cora's parlor house and continued to run a successful network of prostitution houses. However, the racist and sexist attitudes of the 1851 San Francisco Vigilance Committee did not die down with the decline of the Committee, and as the city became more and more diverse as the Gold Rush ended, bigotry in San Francisco only grew.

In 1854, the city passed Ordinance 546 "To Suppress Houses of Ill Fame Within City Limits" which criminalized prostitution in the city of San Francisco. While this ordinance did not, of course, immediately close Ah Toy's brothel, she was arrested in that year, convicted and fined \$20 for keeping a "disorderly house."<sup>43</sup> The law was written to address all forms of prostitution in the city, but it disproportionately affected women of color and essentially was implemented as a tool to disempower them. Chinese, Mexican and Chilean sex workers were the targets of this ordinance, and as the most powerful Chinese madam, Ah Toy became, again, an obvious mark, and her first arrest in 1854 was the first of many.

The selective enforcement of this San Francisco city ordinance law against women of color, particularly Chinese women, was not unique. Starting in 1850, the de facto anti-Chinese sentiment in California was legalized by the State Supreme Court. First, the Foreign Miners Tax of 1850, which was intended to disempower Chinese and

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<sup>43</sup> Gentry, Curt. 57-58.

other miners of color, and after it was ruled unconstitutional it was replaced with the Foreign Miners License Tax of 1852. While these laws disempowered Chinese men, they did not have a directly negative effect on Ah Toy except for setting a precedent for de jure racism in California. However, the *People vs. Hall* ruling in 1854 by the California Supreme Court made it so that Chinese individuals were not allowed to testify against white people in court<sup>44</sup> and effectively removed a level of power that Ah Toy had enjoyed and successfully exercised. This ruling in 1854, as well as San Francisco Ordinance 546 in the same year, marked the beginning of Ah Toy's legal disempowerment.

Following her arrest and conviction in 1854, Ah Toy was arrested several more times over the next three years as she continued to conduct business as a madam in San Francisco. After three years and several arrests, in 1857 Ah Toy chose to leave San Francisco, telling reporters she was leaving with no intentions of ever returning. Ah Toy sold her house and does indeed seem to have left San Francisco, but it became clear in 1859 that she had, likely, planned to return, as she reappeared in the city and resumed her work as madam. In March of 1859, less than two years after her initial departure from the city, Ah Toy was arrested again for "disorderly house keeping" in the city of San Francisco. If her intention had in fact been to leave San Francisco forever, or at least to keep a low profile, she surely did not fulfill it, and was arrested again in July and September for beating one of her employees and brothel keeping, respectively.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Chinn, Thomas W. "New Chapters in Chinese-American History." *California History* 57, no. 1 (1978): 2-7. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25157812>.

<sup>45</sup> Gentry, Curt. *Madams of San Francisco*. 58.



After her arrest in September of 1859, Ah Toy followed through with her 1857 proclamation: she left San Francisco and never returned. Her absence was quickly noticed but her legacy was not soon lost to history. Her impression on Gold Rush San Francisco lasted long after the Rush ended.. “She was a tall, well-built woman. In fact, she was the finest-looking woman I have ever seen,” wrote Charles P. Duane in 1881, more than two decades after her departure from the city. Even decades after her final departure from San Francisco her clients kept her image and memory alive, though most surmised her dead or returned to China

While Gold Rush San Francisco assumed Ah Toy long gone after her emigration in 1859 — she in fact moved from the city to San Jose, about 40 miles to the south. While little is known of her life in San Jose, she purportedly married a wealthy Chinese man and lived as a socialite in the city. After her husband’s death, as an elderly woman, she started selling clams, doing so until her death. This adaptiveness, from Chinese prostitute to American madam to wife to clam seller, reveals that Ah Toy as a truly independent woman. While she did rely on others to climb the social ladder, like John Clark and her husband in San Jose, her relationships were calculated in a way that only further illuminates her acumen. Her enterprising, bold nature was unlike many madams of her time and place, but moreover it was essentially incongruous with what was expected and allowed of women, then and now, and excluded from the romanticized version of the American madam.

On February 2, 1928, a San Francisco newspaper again printed the name Ah Toy - almost 70 years after her departure from the city. The San Francisco *Examiner* printed a

brief obituary for Ah Toy, the Gold Rush San Francisco celebrity, who died within days of her 100th birthday.<sup>46</sup> As the city in 1928 was so dramatically changed from its Gold Rush days, the obituary and the audience that it reached had very little interest in or understanding of just how remarkable Ah Toy was, and how important and powerful she was in the city that was Gold Rush San Francisco. The unregulated era of vice had ended, the demographic and sex ratios had leveled with other American cities, and the legacy of the city's madans had gone quiet.

Certainly, Ah Toy was remembered by her customers, but the legacy she left on San Francisco was far greater than lusty recollections in the minds of men. Ah Toy was the first of two Chinese women in a city of mostly men, and despite social pressure to submit to the will of an emerging white patriarchy in the city, she operated a financially successful brothel for almost a decade, leaving to live an incredibly long life less than 40 miles from the city that made her famous. While her actions in terms of trafficking and mistreating girls and women in her employ were not ethical according to the standards of our time, her shockingly independent upward mobility in the city was exceptional.

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<sup>46</sup> Gentry, Curt. 58.

## Conclusion

The American imagination has long harbored an obsession with the image of the madam of the Wild West. This woman has been fictionalized time and again as a cornerstone character of the Western genre, and was of course built around the actual characters of Gold Rush madams. With any trope, however, it is particularly illuminating to examine how the character can be used as a symbol for the culture that created it. In this case, the character of the madam can be seen as reflective of American ideals. The imagined madam represents a strong independent woman, and her existence in the Gold Rush assures the American audience that women have had the opportunity to achieve independence throughout time. However, this independence is represented in the form of the madam in a form that is safe and accessible, namely not fundamentally threatening to the hierarchies that lay at the fabric of American culture. The American madam, then, is most often imagined and fictionalized as white and reliant on a male lover financially and socially. Both of these aspects of the imagined madam's identity conform to the dominant culture of white patriarchy.

Like Belle Cora, while the madam may be an icon of independence, she is only allowed so much freedom until she, herself, threatens social order. Belle Cora is the iconic safe representation of the resistance of the madam. She exceeded the typical social space allowed women of her time, but she did so through the confines of the hierarchies she was supposedly overturning. Ah Toy, however, circumvented these hierarchies of race and gender to make her uniquely independent woman, de-normalizing these systems

of control and threatening the organization of American authority. To mitigate this threat while simultaneously celebrating the madam and a notion of female empowerment, the trope of madam has been written along the lines of Belle Cora's storyline rather than Ah Toy's.

Both Ah Toy and Belle Cora were beautiful, resourceful and successful in their trade. This much can be seen as a contribution of the two to an accurate image of the madam. As time has progressed, more space has been created in the representation of the madam in fiction to allow diverse narratives like Ah Toy's into the social sphere. Notably, Thandie Newton's role in HBO series "Westworld," which debuted in 2016, has opened a door for more racial and ethnic diversity within the madam trope. This progress in the fictional memorialization of the American Western madam will surely be the beginning of a greater expansion of the trope, but this can only be so if the disparity between the image and existence of the madam is recognized and understood.

Works of film, television and fiction portray madams as popular, powerful and coercive - all of which Ah Toy and Belle Cora were. However, they largely ignore the uglier sides of the madams, leaving out their trafficking of young girls and women, holding them in an indentured servitude of prostitution, and often mistreating and physically abusing them. Ah Toy and Belle Cora's ascension to political, social and economic significance in a city of men was not victimless. They, themselves, cannot be considered entirely victims. The complexities of these women, in their meteoric rise and fall, and what they did to get there, must be understood as part of an interesting American dichotomy in the representation of women - that in order to represent them as

non-threateningly independent, the uglier side of women as perpetrators of violence need be painted over. While America does love to demonize women, in order to portray the madam as progressive and not transgressive, the trope cannot include this uglier side of the madam's role.

The study of Ah Toy and Belle Cora, in comparison to each other and to the trope of the American madam, has explored the distance between the image and the reality of Western prostitution. Too, it has called attention to the incredible diversity within the role of Gold Rush madam, and carved space for alternative narratives, like Ah Toy's, to the dominantly white and ultimately subservient madam, like Belle Cora. Ultimately, it has explored the question at the core of representation of madams: what does it mean to be an independent woman?

Because the trope of madam was born in the middle of the 19th century, it is easy, almost two centuries later, to reflect with the benefit of hindsight and decades of progress and debunk the myth of the independent madam. The trouble in doing so, however, is two-fold. Pragmatically, applying modern conceptions of gender and racial hierarchy to the Gold Rush is does not take into account different notions of race and gender autonomy throughout time. Secondly, by discrediting the madam of her true independence, one is left with the notion that true independence and strength as a woman did not exist as a possibility in the Gold Rush era. Ethically, this is problematic.

However difficult it is to remove one's modern conception of autonomy from the analysis of the historical and mythicized madam, it is necessary to understand the difference between the two - the historical and the mythicized - and to recognize that

while independent madams did exist, like Ah Toy, their independence and strength is not of the same ilk of those represented in the trope. Understanding this, one is left with the distinct impression that the American imagination is keen to identify equality but quick to temper it when it threatens to subvert racial and gender hierarchies. The madam is only a case study in this respect, portrayed as palatably powerful and not a single degree more. Other figures of resistance are similarly remembered in American history, and a critical eye must be taken to every American trope in order to glean the truth and motivation behind each figure. The historical era of the Gold Rush madam imposed social limitations on the roles of women, and the madam's ability to transcend these limitations is what made her notable. These same limitations, however, continue to exist today, and continue to color the perpetuation of the madam in a non-subversive way. To truly understand American history, one must examine how American hierarchies acted in the historical era, as well as understanding that those same hierarchies have continued into the present to affect our understanding of that time. Doing so, we see that despite changing ideas of autonomy over time, the American woman has never achieved full independence and still lives in a state of inequality that is an intersectional aspect of her identity.